

Back Again, Back Again: King, Part 2

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode four: King, Part Two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: *What does it say?* I asked carefully, tilting the blade back and forth so the engravings caught the light.

Rhia peered at the writings, carved along the base of the blade, close to the guard. *They will tear your city down,* she said carefully, *The soldier and poet and king.*

I know those words by heart. *Perit perriber civitad de ilms, rex et poeta et soldat.*

We -- and you, you who bears this sword -- will make collapse this city. Will overthrow what came before, you soldier and poet and king.

Or: go and tear this city down.

But I couldn't yet translate for myself, and what she said was true enough.

Who are they? I asked. *The soldier and poet and king.*

Rhia grimaced and frowned just slightly, seeming to pick her words carefully. *They are why you are here. And all will be explained, but not by me.*

And then, suddenly, occurred to me a question I should've thought to ask a long time before: *If you know English -- if you know this language, the language I speak, are you royal, too?* As I asked, I flinched: I'd assumed she wasn't, in the way she'd stood and dressed, less gilded than the people of court I'd seen -- but maybe she was just different than her family. Maybe the language itself denoted royal birth, regardless of how the owner treated it, here, and I was but a strange outlier.

The idea cemented itself in my mind, and suddenly feeling like a fool for not seeing it sooner, I started to kneel, remembering how the soldier-prince had knocked my knees out from under me in front of his parents.

No, she shot back, before all else. Color warmed on her bronze cheeks, and her eyes ducked down from mine. *No, I am not. Get up. There are very few here who know your language -- the language of prophecy, the language of the book -- but we have all known that when you come, this is what you will speak.*

I remembered the prince, taking off his helmet and addressing his pallid father on his throne: *hair of fire. Dressed in gold. Magic in her veins.*

Is that what vatakina eligida means? Someone who speaks like me?

She blinked rapidly. *That is what they called you? Not the court or soldiers, but the prince himself?*

I... think. I said. There were a lot of them. That had said it.

She nodded and looked again to the sword. *It means "chosen one." Prophecy child.*

Oh, I said, as if the whole scene of earlier, the sword and tree and prince and magic had all been sheer happenstance, a huge cosmic joke that would soon be resolved. As if I hadn't woken up in a strange land and hadn't been able to find my way back.

As if, even then, I wanted to find my way back. *So you know English -- my language -- because you, too, are, chosen?*

No, she snapped again, just as defensive. *Those who know how you speak have learned it from a book, passed down among the kings from parent to child for a long time. And each time the book finds a new generation, another girl like me is taught, too, so that when you came, you would have a teacher and translator.*

I see, I said, and a friend?

She hesitated. *A friend, too.*

You've found it, called a voice from across the courtyard. In tandem, Rhia and I startled and whirled around as the prince strode across the lawn, palms raised defensively.

The prince grinned, and began to talk with Rhia in the other language -- Rhysean -- as he approached. He gestured not-very subtly towards me, and I very awkwardly tried to avoid making accidental eye contact with him even as I stared, until they seemed to finish whatever conversation they were having.

After a half-second pause, the prince picked back up in English. *Thank you, Rhia. I'll send --*

Ilyaas, Rhia supplied, before I could open my mouth, and I suddenly realized that despite having ridden with him for some hours, despite me having met his parents and called them *king* and the whole sword-from-the-tree thing, neither of us knew the other's name.

I'll send Ilyaas up to you after we finish talking. He smiled at her again, and she nodded and turned back towards the castle.

I tried not to seem nervous. I was very nervous, being this close to a cute dark-eyed prince who knew a lot more about the world around me than I did, who could be, if the day prior was any indication, very loud and scary when he wanted to be, so I

tried to quell my heart, which I feared was beating so loudly it would betray my fear straight-up.

I don't know your name, I blurted out, and then instantly regretted the way my tone came off, but either he was too polite to react to it or he genuinely hadn't noticed.

It's Cassius Rex, he replied. *But -- Cassian. Call me Cassian.*

Rex meaning King, I said, half to myself, and then repeated it, louder, upon his sideways glance. *Rex meaning King*, I clarified, definitely trying to sound like I hadn't just learned that from where it was engraved on my sword. I gestured, vaguely, to the circlet that sat on his head. *Very subtle. Aren't royals meant to have names taller than they are?*

He almost seemed taken aback at my half-jab. But it was true: every royal I'd read about had a string of titles that trailed after their first name like streamers. *Maybe where you come from*, he said. He crossed his arms and tossed his dark curls back from his face. The circlet atop his head glinted in the light. *But that is hardly necessary. Only the poor feel the need to find meaning in their names, and thus they trail on until something can be divined from it.*

Your name means king, I said. *That seems like meaning.*

That's fact, he said, tone hardening a decibel, *not a projection of a grand destiny never meant to come to fruition. I*

took the name Cassian when I turned twelve, but Rex has always been my family name. And then he stopped, and shook his head, the corner of his mouth quirking. I'm sorry. There's been a lot of discord lately with the name king, and I've jumped right into defending myself before you've even had chance to breathe.

What do you mean? I asked.

I realized I was much more a prince than a princess when I was twelve, he said, and became Cassuis Rex. Well -- Cassian. My friends call me Cassian.

That wasn't a problem for me, never was or would have been, but it didn't answer my question. No -- *with Rex. With king.*

What do you mean?

He took a breath, then paused. *It's a long explanation, and not one I'd like to do standing, if possible.* He gestured to the great tree behind us, with its copper-veined leaves waving gently in the breeze. *Care to sit?*

I did, and he sat down after me, maybe eight or nine inches between us. Tiny wildflowers peppered the ground around the base of the trunk -- blues and purples and whites nestled among the few exposed roots. Cassian caught my eye as I stared at these odd little flowers -- not quite the same as what I knew, but familiar in their defiance of monoculture, familiar in the way I'd gotten used to searching them out among the green of the grass. He grinned, again, crookedly -- just the corner of his

mouth quirking upwards as I skimmed my free hand over their tiny trumpets.

The gardener hates them, but I refuse to let him do a thing about them.

I looked up at him, then, and smiled back, because it felt awkward not to. This was a prince, and he was all the things a prince ought to be -- valiant and, yes, *handsome* in a golden-regal way, a lover of flowers, a protector of the small things that others forget. But this was also a boy who pulled me from a house where I didn't understand a thing and pushed me onto my knees in front of his father, and fear was stronger than any valiantly-hot vibes that he gave off.

What are they called? I asked, thankful for the space between us and the control in my voice.

He frowned. *I don't know the exact names for them, but they're... erm -- brave flowers? Tiny... brave flowers. In... your language?*

I chuckled, and then quickly tried to shut it off as a flush crept into his cheeks, but the redder he got, the harder it was to shut up.

I don't know what the word would be, he defended, *If it's not that.*

We call them wildflowers, I said, *I'm sorry for laughing.*

Wild-flowers, he repeated, softly and carefully, and I nodded.

And... here? I asked, nestling my sword into the grass and leaves and wildflowers beside me. *What do you call them In... here. In the language of... here.* I'd forgotten the word Rhia had used, besides it starting with an *R*.

Cassian pulled a tiny iris-colored wildflower from the ground and twirled it between his fingers. *Rhysean*, he said gently. *The language of here. Rhysean.*

Rhysean, I repeated, and promised myself that this time I would not forget. *And... wildflowers are called?*

Frets-Flors, he said, the word falling from his mouth like a friend.

Which is... brave flowers? I guessed.

The flush came back, just a tiny bit. *Yes. You could also call them... savastreflor.*

I tilted my head. *Which is?*

Untamed-flower. Unwanted-flower. He said.

Oh, I said, but it came out more like an *oof*.

Which is why I say frets-flors. Because they are brave, not unwanted.

Cassian passed the flower to me, and my heart did not change pace as his fingers brushed mine. He leaned back against the bark of the old tree. *But that isn't why we sat down,*

Ilyaas-from-somewhere. He looked back to me, smirking. *Is there more to that name? A grand projection of destiny?*

It's just Ilyaas, I said, but that wasn't true. I had a last name and an embarrassing string of middle names that my parents had seen fit to gift me, but Ilyaas was easier.

Just-Ilyaas, he said. *Ilyaas-from-somewhere.*

I laughed and thought about Georgia. *Ilyaas-from-nowhere.*

Ilyaas-from-beyond-here, he corrected.

I rolled my eyes. *Which you're certain of because --*

Cassian pulled one leg upwards towards his chest. *This is why we sat down. I'm going to tell you a story, Ilyaas-from-somewhere. It begins with a book filled with prophecy and ends someday soon, some leagues away from the city, with a group of rebels that would burn this world to the ground. It ends with you, and me, and a person yet-to-be found, but that's farther ahead already.*

Then how does it begin? I asked.

Long ago, he said, *my family was entrusted with a book filled with your language by a very powerful girl. We were told to keep the book safe, and to never forget what was inside. So -- each generation took on the knowledge, and held the book, and learned to speak like that ancient girl. She was from a Somewhere, too -- a beyond I believe must be the same as yours. It said much, but the most important piece was a story about a*

girl who would come from beyond, dressed in gold with hair like fire. This girl -- The Girl That Starts It All -- would find two others to make a soldier-poet-king, and the three of them would defeat the coming tyrant. The way to know -- beyond the coming that was predicted, was if she could wake the buried magic.

He caught a leaf on the wind, copper-gold-green, and nodded to my sword. You did that. And thus, the prophecy has begun.

*So there are three? I asked, trying not to feel both overly self-important and soul-crushingly anxious at the idea that, one, I was not this child of prophecy but some poor stand-in and there was a big mistake that'd occurred, or, two, that I was, but that I'd somehow screw it up so colossally that the damage would be irrevocable. If there were three, that meant, at least, that there would be checks-and-balances, but I wasn't particularly good at fighting or singing or being a leader. All of my choices as prophecy child seemed to lead back to the first option: that *oh, god, I was going to screw this up.**

You, we think, Cassian said, are the soldier. Meant to change the world.

I thought back to what he said, so surely: Rex meaning King? That's fact, not a grand projection of a destiny never meant to come to fruition.

And you think you're the king. It wasn't said with any note of incredulity, but he stiffened all the same.

It fits with the prophecy. And the two are meant to find each other first -- and they're supposed to work closely together. There's a reason you were brought here, Ilyaas. You're meant to find the other two, and we know the tyrant has come -- the rebels, in the hills, laying cities low. It makes sense that the to-be-king would be as much a part of the prophecy as the Girl Who Starts It All.

I nodded. Yep, I was going to mess this up. *What else does it say?*

It says that all three are the same age. I was born seventeen summers ago, and... he hesitated. I could hear the apprehension in his voice, the possibility that everything he'd dreamt for himself could fall apart with my answer.

Twelve-o-three, *happy birthday, happy birthday to me.* But as far as I'd known then, I'd turned seventeen the day before.

Yesterday was my birthday, I said, *I'm seventeen, too.*

He breathed out, slowly, eyes half-closing. Relief. He tried to play it off, too -- *autumn child. It suits you.*

Thank you? I said, like Rose Red in The Camera Shop. An answer as A question. I cleared my throat. *So I'm the soldier? And you're the king. What about the poet?* The poet that he'd mentioned, our third. The last name that shouted to me from the sword: go and tear the city down, rex et poeta et soldat.

We will find them. It says we will find them. He sounded just as much as if he were trying to convince himself. *We have time. We're both here. The third will come.*

And then what? I asked.

We win.

That statement -- so bold, a proclamation and a plea at once -- hung in the air, given to the gods and who knows what else. Then Cassian stood, brushing off his pants and offering me a hand up. I took it without a thought, infinitely more comfortable with the boy-king that stood before me now, one as unsure of his future as I was mine, than the princeling who'd found me the day before.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.